

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS PEER COUNSELING?

In Washington, peer counseling is an approved Medicaid service. In order to bill Medicaid, contracted agencies must use individuals who have met the state requirements, taken the approved class, and passed the state test. Peer counseling duties can vary widely, but they are all based on the effectiveness of assistance and support from individuals with shared life experience who are living in recovery. Peer counselors use their own stories in helping others develop hope and improve their lives. Peer counseling may be provided by adults, youth, or by parents or legal guardians in assisting families. Peer counseling or peer support can be provided in many other settings, such as consumer-run organizations and housing programs. The Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery peer support program, however, is specifically designed to prepare individuals to work in a Medicaid setting.

WHAT DO CERTIFIED PEER COUNSELORS DO?

Peer counselors may work in various settings, such as community clinics, hospitals, and crisis teams. Peer counselors, under the supervision of a Mental Health Professional and as part of a healthcare team:

- Assist an individual or family in identifying services and activities that promote recovery and lead to increased meaning and purpose
- Assist individuals and families in developing their own goals
- Articulate parts of their own recovery stories that are relevant and helpful in overcoming the obstacles faced by individuals and families
- Promote personal responsibility for recovery
- Assist in a wide range of services to assist in regaining control and success in their own lives (e.g. developing supportive relationships, self-advocacy, stable housing, education, and employment)
- Serve as an advocate
- Model skills in recovery and self-management
- Complete documentation regarding their services according to Medicaid and employer requirements

CAN PEERS PROVIDE PEER COUNSELING WITHOUT DBHR CERTIFICATION?

Yes, providing the service is not billed to Medicaid. Providing peer support does not require licensure except to meet requirements of Medicaid payment.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS TO QUALIFY AS A CERTIFIED PEER COUNSELOR?

Certification has three steps: apply and be accepted as a possible training applicant, successfully complete a 40-hour approved training, and pass the state exam. Upon passing the test, individuals receive a letter confirming they have met these requirements. It should be noted that many employers also require licensure from the Department of Health as an Agency Affiliated Counselor after being hired. Employers are generally knowledgeable about this process, or employees may contact the Department of Health directly. This licensure is only required for individuals providing Medicaid billable services.

WHAT ARE THE APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS?

Applicants must meet these criteria:

1. Identify as a consumer of mental health services as defined by WAC 388-865-0150/
 - “Consumer” means:

- A person who has applied for, is eligible for, or who has received mental health services.
 - For a child under the age of thirteen, or for a child age thirteen or older whose parents or legal guardians are involved in the treatment plan, the definition of consumer includes parents or legal guardians.
2. Be 18 or older
 3. Have completed a high school diploma or hold a GED (An application to waive this requirement is also available)
 4. Be in mental health recovery for at least one year
 5. Demonstrate qualities of leadership
 6. Demonstrate proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills

HOW DO I APPLY?

Obtain the training application, available online at the DBHR peer support website:

<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/dbhr/mhpeer.shmtl> or from the DBHR. The application includes an instruction page, which should be followed carefully. Once your application is received, it will be reviewed and scored. Applications which are incomplete or do not fully answer questions are returned. When your application is approved, you will receive a letter notifying you that you are on the training wait list.

WHAT TYPES OF TRAINING IS AVAILABLE

There are currently three Certified Peer Counseling trainings available: Standard training, Family and Youth training, and Spanish training. All trainings result in the same certification. There is a box on the application form to indicate preferences. The trainings provided by the State of Washington are listed on the website. Additionally, several Regional Support Networks hold their own trainings using the same curriculum and a state-approved applicant list. Regional Support Networks may have their own priorities for training. The dates and locations of their trainings are not available on this website.

WHAT IS THE FAMILY/YOUTH TRAINING?

The Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery piloted a new curriculum in Family and Youth Certified Peer Counselor training in 2013. This training, while covering the same topics as the Standard training, is specifically designed to prepare parent and youth Certified Peer Counselors. Parents and youth often benefit from learning with a larger group of their peers. Note that there is no age requirement for the youth training, but applicants are expected to be of a similar age or have substantial experience working with youth. The ability to form truly “peer” relationships is the most important criteria. Parents and youth are welcome to take the Standard training as well, and will be invited to all trainings according to preferences stated in their applications.

WHAT IS THE APPLICATION PROCESS?

Applicants print and fill out the application form on the website, carefully following all instructions. All applications are submitted directly to DBHR, including applications for the Youth and Family training. Applications are read and scored as described in the application instructions. All questions must be answered completely as incomplete applications are returned. Applicants will receive a letter informing them whether their application has been approved. Once approved, applicants are placed on a waiting list for trainings. Trainings are filled by priority and application date, and invitations are issued about a month before each training.

HOW DO I COMPLETE AN EXCEPTION TO EDUCATION REQUIREMENT LETTER?

Applicants who have not received a high school diploma or GED may apply for an educational requirement exemption. Applicants must write their own letter of request, without assistance, to accompany their application. The letter should explain the circumstances that have prevented them from completing the educational requirement and describe how they have gained comparable reading and writing abilities. The letter must demonstrate high school level writing skills. Applicants describing plans to complete their education will be given additional consideration.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I AM APPROVED FOR TRAINING?

When trainings are scheduled, participants are invited using various criteria, such as those already employed, those living in the area of the training, or those scoring highly on their applications. Please note that DBHR receives far more training requests than there are training spaces and wait times for trainings can be a year or longer.

Several trainings are provided only for individuals in a particular region, and others are statewide. Applicants may not request to be enrolled in specific trainings. Invitation lists are created shortly before a training, and applicants will be invited by mail or email on average a month before the training.

Because of the high volume of applicants, DBHR cannot answer queries about a person's status for an individual training. Applicants should ensure their contact information remains updated. If you have not been invited to a training within a year, please contact Bonnie Staples at 360-725-1883.

HOW MUCH DOES TRAINING COST?

There is no cost for their peer counseling training, training materials, or test. Trainings that are offered regionally provide snacks and lunch, while statewide trainings also provide lodging. Travel is not covered.

WHAT IS THE TRAINING LIKE?

All trainings are 40 hours in length. Most trainings occur over five days, although a few are split over two weeks. Students primarily study the peer counselor manual, which includes many individual and group activities. Trainings are interactive, with students expected to participate actively in activities and discussions. Students are also expected to follow the Code of Conduct that allows all students to be safe and successful in the training.

WHAT IS THE CERTIFIED PEER COUNSELING TEST LIKE?

The DBHR test is administered by one contractor, currently Washington State University. The test will be held in a location near the test location approximately 2-3 weeks after training. The test has a written multiple choice section and an oral section answered to a small panel. Applicants have three attempts to pass the test. They may then request to be re-training, but this opportunity is not guaranteed.

HOW IS DBHR'S PEER COUNSELING PROGRAM DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PEER PROGRAMS?

Many organizations provide peer support and training. Some examples are NAMI's Peer to Peer, WA Dads and Recovery Innovations. Although these programs may be very helpful to individuals, DBHR has no authority or oversight of these programs. The DBHR program of peer support is the only state-approved pathway to qualify an individual to work in a Medicaid agency.

WHAT IF I AM A PEER WITH CO-OCCURRING OR CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY ISSUES?

Currently, licensing and training are only available to peers with mental health challenges.

Individuals with co-occurring disorders qualify for the training; however, those with solely chemical dependency issues do not. The reasons for this exclusion are related to funding and Medicaid rules. Washington is actively seeking approval for chemical dependency peer support in alignment with our value of behavioral health integration.

WILL I GET HIRED AS A CERTIFIED PEER COUNSELOR?

DBHR can begin to train individuals as Certified Peer Counselors, but this does not guarantee employment. Individuals must have the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by employers for specific jobs. Not every peer is well-suited to work in this field. Although opportunities for employment are increasing, current employment opportunities are limited. DBHR maintains an email list to distribute information it receives about available positions, but positions are more often advertised locally and on internet job search sites.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

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